



REDEFINING FEMININITY: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN THE SHORT STORIES OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE AND SUNITA JAIN

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Abstract: This research article explores the way in which Bharati Mukherjee and Sunita Jain redefine femininity with the help of new narrative strategies and socio-cultural commentaries with themes like diaspora, cultural hybridity, and opposition to patriarchy. It contrasts the micro-level psychological changes represented in the works by Mukherjee with the socio-political and feminist oppositions symbolized in the works of Jain, and thus makes the argument on the necessity of integrated identity studies encompassing intersectionality and the spirituality of femininity.

Index Terms - Femininity, Diaspora, Patriarchy, Cultural hybridity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Femininity in the context of literary works has been closely related to patriarchal ideology that dictates the role of daughter, wife and mother. Women have little opportunity to express their identity other than those groups. Post-independence literature by Indian women writers in English has experienced a boom of female authors questioning these roles, and providing different perspectives on female subjectivity. Bharati Mukherjee and Sunita Jain are the ones who stand out by their delicate examinations of femininity even though they are writing with totally different perceptions.

Mukherjee is an Indian-American author who is renowned for her diasporic stories that pre-empt immigrant women trying to be negotiating cultural hybridity, displacement, and patriarchal restraints. In her short stories, including those in books like *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), she portrays women who are defying the conventional roles and are asserting agency in the new cultural environments. On the other side, Sunita Jain puts her fiction in the Indian socio-cultural context. Her works including the stories of *A Woman is Dead and Other Stories* (2010) are centered on the plight of women in the domestic settings, marriages and places of employment, the harrowing challenges that women face against the patriarchal ruling yet are nuanced and strong in ways that women oppose the structure.

The comparison of Mukherjee and Jain is especially productive as it enables us to explore femininity in the two but related settings: diasporic and domestic ones. The characters of Mukherjee differ in terms of how they deal with migration, cultural dissonance, and the reconstruction of identity, whereas the characters of Jain have to deal with the daily oppressions of patriarchy in Indian families and institutions.

This paper claims that despite the cultural perspective of their writing, Mukherjee and Jain both have a similar interest in breaking the essentialist ideas of womanhood. Their short stories show that women are not passive victims but active change agents who negotiate, resist and redefine their identities. By analyzing some of the stories by the two authors, the paper shows that through resistance, negotiation, and self-assertion, femininity is redefined.

The notion of femininity has always been perceived as a cultural attribute and not a biological determinant. The idea of femininity being a product of socialisation and cultural traditions is emphasised by the seminal statement made by Simone de Beauvoir according to which "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949, p. 267). The theory of gender performativity proposed by Judith Butler (1990) also underlines the fact that gender is a behaviour acquired through continuous repetition and not an innate identity. These theoretical concepts play a critical role in understanding the way characters of Mukherjee and Jain play and oppose gender roles.

The concept of femininity in the Indian context has traditionally been associated with chastity, sacrifices and woman's role as a homemaker. Women are supposed to demonstrate patience, obedience, and other selfless virtues at the expense of their personalities. These ideals have long been supported by literature, as women were shown as obedient wives, motherly figures foreign to literature and as a victim of tragedy. Nonetheless, modern female authors have broken these depictions and provided different images of femininity in which emphasis is laid on self-determination, sexuality, and rebellion.

The fiction of Mukherjee is richly written on the basis of her personal experience as an immigrant in North America. The main characters of her tales have a tendency to reside in-between as they are torn between the cultural realities of the motherland and the liberating and alienating West. Women depicted in stories like "A Wife's Story" and "The Management of Grief" deal with the

issues of cultural dislocation and are able to assert themselves as agents. Their femininity is re-packaged not into submission but in strength, flexibility and independence of choice.

Instead, Jain dwells upon the Indian household territory revealing the divisions of patriarchal families. Her fiction like “A Woman is Dead” and “The Housewife” portrays women in the marriage and in household chores, but secretly rebel against patriarchy. The heroes of Jain tend to oppose by refusing, keeping quiet, or by doing minor acts of defiance, and undermine the idea that femininity equals sacrifices and obedience.

The paper uses qualitative textual analysis of the short stories by Mukherjee and Jain, which have been selected. It also points out how the definition of femininity is modified in various cultural settings showing the flexibility and strength of female identity.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The reconstruction of femininity in the works of Bharati Mukherjee and Sunita Jain can't be interpreted without referring to the theoretical discussions within feminism and postcolonial thinking as a whole. The two authors question the cultural construction of gender, albeit in different perspectives: Mukherjee in the context of diaspora and cultural hybridity, and Jain in the framework of Indian domesticity and social institutions. In order to review their works, this paper relies on the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha.

● Simone de Beauvoir: Becoming a Woman

The Second Sex (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir is a work that is still central to feminist theory. The fact that femininity is a cultural creation is supported by her claim that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 267), when she states that a woman is not born. Women are conditioned into being obedient, sacrificing and domesticizing which are being told as natural yet they are imposed.

In “The Housewife” by Jain, the main character reflects over the roughness of her hands which is the result of the domestic works that she does yet her contribution is unrecognised: “Her hands were raw from work, but no one noticed” (Jain, 2010, p. 62) and this is the concept that Beauvoir proposes for a woman as an inherent one. This state is criticized in the narrative where Jain reveals the way femininity is degraded to domestic labour.

Mukherjee, in her turn, plays on the chances to go beyond the natural. In “A Wife's Story”, Panna makes an announcement “I am free, afloat, watching somebody else” (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 28) informs us that she will move towards the level of transcendence where she claims that she is free, afloat and is watching another person.

● Judith Butler: Gender Performativity

Judith Butler in her book, *Gender Trouble* (1990) develops the performativity concept of gender: instead of being natural, it is formed through a series of acts, gestures, and behaviours. This observation is very important to comprehend the ways in which the characters of Mukherjee and Jain are defiant of gender expectations.

The main character in “The Tenant” is unwilling to play a role of the responsible wife: “They want a wife, not a woman” [Mukherjee, 1988, p. 95]. She undermines the performative script of femininity by refusing to get married and insisting on sexual autonomy.

“The Interview” by Jain also shows the performativity that women are expected to have in workplaces. The incompatibility of femininity with professional abilities is manifested by the verbal claim of the interviewer who says “We prefer men; women leave after marriage” (Jain, 2010, p. 47). The angry silence of the protagonist acts as a struggle against the role of the submissive obedience set.

● Chandra Talpade Mohanty: Postcolonial Feminism

The book *Feminism Without Borders* (2003) by Mohanty criticizes western feminist studies that normalize the Third World Women as passive victims, and proposes a closer study which would acknowledge the heterogeneity of the women experiences.

This is the complexity demonstrated by Mukherjee through her diasporic women. The American narrator in the story, “Loose Ends”, portrays the immigrant women as “women who don't belong anywhere, not here, not there” (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 210), becoming an example of the cross over of the race, gender and migration. The framework provided by Mohanty shows that these women cannot be assigned to one category; their femininity is made up of various and intersecting oppressions.

In comparison, the characters of Jain are located in Indian families and organizations. Their efforts, expressed in marriage: “A Woman is Dead” or in the work place: “The Interview”, explain the peculiarities of the Indian patriarchy. As Mohanty encourages, we subject the texts of Jain's stories to a contextual analysis to realize that there is need to interpret them in their particular cultural context instead of generalizing on the feminist categories.

● Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: The Subaltern and Silence

The essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) by Spivak challenges the silencing of the marginalized voice, especially of women in the postcolonial context, which asserts that the subaltern woman is twice silenced, firstly, by the colonial discourse, and secondly, by native patriarchy.

The argument of Spivak rings very loudly in Jain's “A Woman is Dead”. The main character, “lived like a shadow, and now she was gone like one” (Jain, 2010, p. 14) can be taken as an example of the silenced subaltern woman whose subjectivity is washed away. Nevertheless, this silence is reclaimed by Jain as a critique in order to make the readers face the violence of erasure.

Silence in a diasporic context that Mukherjee investigates in “The Management of Grief” is also present there. The first passivity of Shaila Bhawe, when she describes herself as, “I am the one to whom others look for strength, but I am the weakest” (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 172) proves that it is difficult to express grief with bureaucratic and patriarchal organizations. Her next vigorous position, though, transforms silence to agency, thus making Spivak pessimistic about subaltern speech difficult.

● Homi K. Bhabha: Hybridity and Cultural Negotiation

The idea of hybridity as described by Bhabha in the book, *The Location of Culture* (1994) anticipates the so-called “third space” in which cultures are negotiated and constructed. The framework in question is particularly relevant to the diasporic women of Mukherjee, who exist in the intermediary positions between East and West.

In “A Wife’s Story”, Panna laughs at the power of her husband, but it is not only a feminist gesture but also a blend of two, a result of her bargaining with the Indian patriarchal culture and American individualism. It is thus through the “third space” of the diaspora that her femininity is recreated.

The women characters of Jain, though not of the diasporic kind, are part of the cultural negotiation in the Indian patriarchy. The announcement of the desire by the main character in “The Other Woman” is a hybrid identity, which challenges both old-fashioned morality and new expectations: “She wanted more than the role of wife; she wanted to feel alive” (Jain, 2010, p. 88).

Together these theoretical constructs help understand the way Mukherjee and Jain redefine femininity. Beauvoir and Butler explain how femininity is constructed and performative; Mohanty and Spivak highlight the situational influences and politics of silence; Bhabha prefigures the effect of hybridity in identity forming. The application of these insights will improve our knowledge of how the diasporic women of Mukherjee and the protagonists of Jain are able to challenge patriarchal structures and present new images of womanhood.

Bharati Mukherjee: Femininity in Diaspora

The short stories of Bharati Mukherjee are also concerned with the lives of women living in the diaspora liminal spaces. Her characters are often torn between the cultural demands of their own Indian culture and the liberating and alienating culture of the West.

● “A Wife’s Story”: Autonomy and the Body

Panna, an Indian woman, who studies in New York is seen to go through a radical change in the story, “A Wife’s Story”. At first, she is chained to her husband and cultural norms of Indian patriarchy. But her far-immersion in the American world helps her to reconstruct herself.

At the beginning of the story, Panna says to himself, “I am free, afloat, watching somebody else” (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 28). This case of self-estrangement is an indicator of her being disengaged with the submissive position as a woman.

This turning point is revealed when her husband comes back to India. His frustration with her new independence that expresses in her friendships, laughter and schooling reflects his patriarchal demands. The fact that Panna laughs at his powers is not some frivolous act on its part; it is a symbol of a break and audible denial of obedience.

Here, the concept of femininity is redefined as the freedom in own body and choice. The laughter of Panna is a feminist gesture and it indicates that she does not want to be a prisoner of the role of a dutiful wife.

● “The Management of Grief”: Grief as Empowerment

“The Management of Grief” is one of the most emotionally coloured stories by Mukherjee, based on the true tragedy of bombing of Air India Flight 182. Shailla Bhawe, the main character loses her husband and children in the catastrophe.

To begin with, she is the typical widow portrayed as a silent, passive, and obedient being. She admits, “I am the one to whom others look for strength, but I am the weakest” (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 172).

Shailla uses grief as an agency as the story unfolds. She interacts with her surrounding, helping fellow widows and increasing her resistance to indifference of bureaucracies in Canada. The fact that she does not agree with the established mourning practices like going back to India or remarrying is a feminist renegotiation of power as she sees how mourning may turn into an act of survival. In this story, Mukherjee redefines femininity as the ability to reclaim activity in the face of profound loss.

● “The Tenant”: Sexual Autonomy and Cultural Rebellion

In “The Tenant”, Mukherjee questions the issue of female sexuality in the diaspora. In her rebellion against the culture, the main character, an unmarried Indian woman who lives in the United States, proclaims her sexual autonomy. Thinking of her relationship with the Indian men, she says, “They want a wife, not a woman” (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 95). This quote summarizes the patriarchal compulsion of women who should obey the role of the responsible wife, and, thus, ignore their uniqueness and their passion.

The protagonist disrupts the performative script of femininity by avoiding marriage and not adopting her sexuality. The theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler is quite applicable in this case because the refusal to play the part of a “wife” reveals the artificiality of the gender roles.

Another theme that is criticized by Mukherjee in her story is the continuity of patriarchal viewpoints among the diaspora. The refusal of such expectations by the main character is a radical self-definition. Femininity as a concept in this tale is reformulated into sexual independence and freedom of desire, which undermines both the patriarchal standards of the Indian and the Western cultures.

● “Loose Ends”: Intersectionality and Marginalization

“Loose Ends” is another view on the topic as the author introduces the readers to immigrant women who are viewed by an American man. He calls them, “women who don’t belong anywhere, not here, not there” (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 210). This excessive gaze by this outsider reveals the intersectional marginalization of immigrant women who are oppressed twice by race and sex.

The women in “Loose Ends” are disjointed with their identities determined by displacement and cultural dissonance. However, Mukherjee does not depict them as passive victims; rather, their marginality, as a whole, turns into a place of criticism that reveals the shortcomings of the American liberalism and Indian patriarchy.

The image of immigrant women painted by Mukherjee makes this story more difficult because it depicts them as multifaceted characters who have to deal with multiple forms of oppression. In this respect, femininity is an intersectional phenomenon that is influenced by race, class and migration.

Across these stories, Mukherjee redefines femininity in multiple ways:

- In “A Wife’s Story”, femininity is autonomy and laughter as resistance.
- In “The Management of Grief”, it is strength and leadership in the face of trauma.
- In “The Tenant”, it is sexual autonomy and refusal of patriarchal roles.
- In “Loose Ends”, it is intersectional identity shaped by race and migration.

Mukherjee’s short stories play a vital role in the feminist and postcolonial discourse and provide a vision of femininity that goes past the borders and binaries.

Sunita Jain: Femininity in the Indian Context

Whereas Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction dramatizes the diasporic negotiation of selfhood, Sunita Jain makes her narratives squarely enclosed in the Indian socio-cultural context. The short stories written by Jain often revolve round domestic sphere, marriage and professional worlds hence revealing the hidden but omnipresent roles played by patriarchy in the lives of women. Jain’s women struggle against the constructs of Indian society, unlike the other women in the story who are usually liberated by dislocation, as it is the case with the protagonists of Mukherjee. Their opposition is less vocal, and is usually conveyed by silence and rejection, or minor forms of defiance, but still, it is no less important.

There is a strong sense of psychological realism in the fiction of Jain. She describes the inner world of women and is sensitive to show the conflict between what society wants and what individuals want. Her characters are not heroic revolutionaries, but normal women challenging, resisting and even subverting the roles given to them. By doing so, Jain re-defines femininity as a place of negotiation, strength, and self-assertion in the Indian context.

• **“A Woman is Dead”**: The Erasure of Female Subjectivity

In “A Woman is Dead”, Jain has produced a caustic commentary on the annulment of the subjectivity of women in the male-dominated home. It is stated that the lead character “lived like a shadow, and now she was gone like one” (Jain, 2010, p. 14). This ominous line is used to summarize the invisibility of women whose lives are limited to domestic chores and their identities are merged into the identity of their husbands and their families.

The novel has echoed the case of Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) in which she argues that as the subaltern she is silenced twice: by colonial discourse and by the patriarchy that dominates the natives. Jain’s protagonist is the ideal symbol of such silencing: in life, she lacks a voice and in death, she is wiped out. But the story itself is a reclamation, and the readers are forced to deal with the violence of erasing.

S. Kumar (2010) notes that the stories by Jain, foreground the invisibility of women in Indian households, exposing the cultural mechanisms that render them voiceless. Telling a story of a woman, who lived like a shadow, Jain criticizes the culture of femininity as self-effacing and sacrificing.

• **“The Interview”**: Professional Aspirations and Patriarchal Barriers

“The Interview” changes the domestic concentration towards professional one revealing the systemic pressure that the women experience in the workplace. The main heroine who is a young woman and wants to get a job experiences is subject to gender discrimination when the male interviewer says, “We prefer men; women leave after marriage” (Jain, 2010, p. 47).

That is a very deep-rooted thought process that a woman is a wife and mother, and that her career goals are secondary or interim. The fact that the main character does not speak about this statement, is a way of resistance. She does not agree with the reason of the interviewer, and thus there is a challenge to the cultural script that relegates women to domesticity.

In this case, the theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler comes in handy. The interviewer anticipates the protagonist to play the role of a good wife, who leave their career behind upon getting married. Her rejection subverts the act of femininity.

According to critic Shubha Tiwari (2005), Jain’s fiction captures the subtle humiliations women face in professional spaces, where their competence is overshadowed by patriarchal assumptions. “The Interview”, then, transforms femininity to professional ability and ambition and is against the idea that feminine identity is restricted to the domestic realm.

• **“The Housewife”**: Domestic Labor and Invisible Resistance

Jain depicts the invisibility and tediousness of housework in “The Housewife”. The main character thinks, “Her hands were raw from work, but no one noticed” (Jain, 2010, p. 62). This fragment is the expression of the thankless essence of the domestic work women undertake, which is normalized and made invisible.

The concept of immanence developed by Simone de Beauvoir is also specifically relevant to the discussion of the gender relations in the context of modern Indian literature. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir argues that women are bound to the repetitive and unacknowledged labour, which leaves them in a state that does not allow them to achieve transcendence. The character of Sunita Jain is a good example of this state, which is stuck in an endless cycle of domesticity that is not a profession and not worth being appreciated.

The story, however, suggests the agency and opposition. Even the silent disobedience of the protagonist who refuses to cook or serve is a defiance. This refusal, however, is on a small scale; however, it questions the element of patriarchy that women were only meant to be caretakers.

According to critic S. Kumar (2010) Jain exposes the politics of domestic labour, showing how women’s work is both indispensable and devalued. Jain redefines femininity as a form of resistance even within a domestic setting by pre-empting the refusal of the protagonist.

● **“The Other Woman”**: Desire and Transgression

“The Other Woman” depicts the female desire and extramarital sex and challenges the taboos of female sexuality in society. The main character says, “She wanted more than the role of wife; she wanted to feel alive” (Jain, 2010, p. 88). This statement is destabilizing patriarchal construction of femininity as chastity and self-sacrifice.

Placing the female desire at the centre of the narrative, Jain restores sexuality as a valid aspect of womanhood, a radical twist of Indian society, where sexual agency is usually submerged or stigmatized. The sin committed by the protagonist of wanting fulfilment beyond marriage shows patriarchal definitions of femininity to be inadequate. As a woman, Jain does not want to be imprisoned as the typical self-sacrificing wife, and she asserts her individuality in her desire.

According to critic Meenakshi Mukherjee (1996), Jain’s fiction challenges the moral codes that confine women, offering alternative visions of female subjectivity. Therefore, femininity as desire, agency and the right to transgress is redefined in “The Other Woman”. Across these stories, Sunita Jain redefines femininity in multiple ways:

- In “A Woman is Dead”, femininity is redefined as a critique of erasure.
- In “The Interview”, it is ambition and professional competence.
- In “The Housewife”, it is resistance within domesticity.
- In “The Other Woman”, it is desire and transgression.

In the view of critic S. Kumar (2010), the fiction by Jain offers a powerful critique of Indian patriarchy, redefining femininity as resilience, ambition, and desire. Her stories make significant contributions to Indian feminist literature, giving subtle insights into the experiences of women with a domestic and societal Indian experience.

III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Comparative analysis of Bharati Mukherjee and Sunita Jain offers productive areas of exploring the ways in which femininity is being renegotiated within the different cultural and geographical contexts. Although Mukherjee protagonists struggle with the issues of diaspora, hybridity and cultural dissonance, Jain’s protagonists struggle with patriarchy which is embedded in the Indian domestic and institutional context. In spite of these contextual differences, these two authors agree in that feminism is being redefined through femininity that is fluid, resistant and transformative.

Table 1: Comparison between the works of Mukherjee and Jain

Aspect	Bharati Mukherjee	Sunita Jain
Context	Diasporic, transnational, negotiating East and West	Indian domestic and institutional settings
Key Themes	Hybridity, Cultural dislocation, Identity shifts	Domesticity, Invisibility of labour, Professional discrimination
Representative Stories	“A Wife’s Story”, “The Management of Grief”, “The Tenant”, “Loose Ends”	“A Woman is Dead”, “The Interview”, “The Housewife”, “The Other Woman”
Redefinition of Femininity	Autonomy, resilience, sexual agency, intersectional identity	Recognition of individuality, ambition, resistance within domesticity, legitimacy of desire
Narrative Strategy	Diasporic dislocation as metaphor for transformation	Domestic realism and psychological depth
Mode of Resistance	Radical acts (laughter, refusal, sexual autonomy, activism)	Subtle acts (silence, refusal, small rebellions, desire)
Theoretical Resonance	Butler’s performativity, Bhabha’s hybridity, Mohanty’s contextual feminism	Beauvoir’s immanence, Spivak’s subaltern silence, Mohanty’s contextual feminism
Contribution	Redefines femininity in transnational contexts	Redefines femininity within Indian patriarchy

The comparison outlines that despite Mukherjee and Jain coming at opposite angles in their writing, they both agree on feminist recalibration of femininity. The protagonists of Mukherjee are hybrid, using negotiation culture as a tool of empowerment. The protagonists in Jain on the other hand fight against the system internally; they create a patriarchal gap through silence, denial, and lust.

On comparing Mukherjee and Jain, it is possible to perceive transnational feminist ethos. Both Mukherjee’s diasporic women and Jain’s domestic protagonists redefine femininity outside the limits of nationality and binarity.

Feminism, as per Mohanty (2003), should be attentive to context. Mukherjee and Jain are the examples of this principle: one of them re-calibrates femininity with diaspora, another one with Indian patriarchy. Both contribute to the development of Indian English literature in terms of implicit explorations of gender, identity, and change.

IV. CONCLUSION

This analysis of the short stories of Bharati Mukherjee and Sunita Jain sheds light on two different and yet complementary directions of the redefining of femininity in Indian English literature. The protagonists of Mukherjee are reworking the notion of femininity by being self-sufficient, strong, sexually empowered, and negotiating intersectionally, which includes the protagonists: Panna of “A Wife Story”, Shaila Bhav in “The Management of Grief”, the unnamed narrator of “The Tenant”, and the immigrant women in “Loose Ends”. Their resistance usually comes in radical forms: laughing at patriarchal power, not getting married, reclaiming their sexuality, and transforming grief into activism. The diasporic women by Mukherjee adopt hybridity, and the strategy of negotiation of culture is used as empowerment.

The main characters of Jain, in turn, oppose the Indian patriarchy on the inside. The silenced woman in “A Woman is Dead”, the ambitious job-seeker in “The Interview”, the exhausted but rebellious lady in “The Housewife”, and the desiring woman in “The Other Woman”, all oppose the cultural ideals of femininity as sacrifice, obedience and chastity. They express their resistance more softly but no less effective: silence, refusal, minor rebellions, and desire assertion. The women in Jain reveal the cracks of patriarchy by not following its anticipations, even in cases where it is impossible to escape its framework.

This paper highlights the fact that femininity is transformed in different cultural contexts, which is fluid and flexible in terms of female identity. It also supports the need to contextualize feminist critique to cultural and historical contexts, promoted by postcolonial feminism. In conclusion, the short stories of Bharati Mukherjee and Sunita Jain indicate that literature is a powerful field of reworking the aspect of gender. Their heroes (both male and female), who laugh at patriarchal authority, who refuse to get married, or who believe in professional ambition or who reclaim desire, represent new forms of womanhood that challenge or alter established cultural standards. Their works are essential pieces of the feminist and postcolonial discussion providing the reader with the image of femininity that is not bound by tradition or location, but by further-evolving and changing forces.

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